

HOW DISABLED IS THE CHURCH IN MALAWI? THE AMBIVALENCE OF ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION IN THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO DISABILITY

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1. Introduction

By its very nature the church is a caring community in which all those who are weary and burdened find rest (Matt 11:28). Paul's claim that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, male and female (Gal 3:28), underscores the fact that the church is an alternative community where all people, including those with disability, have equal worth and value. The principle of equal worth and value has its foundation in Genesis' creation theology where humanity is made in the image and likeness of God and is therefore sacred (Gen 1:26-27). This implies that every person, whether disabled or not, is precious from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. In view of this understanding, the measure of every institution or policy is whether it enhances the life and dignity of all human persons irrespective of their bodily status. However, the practice of the church in relation to people with disability has not always been in consonance with the biblical/theological vision. Evidence shows that while more people with disability have been beneficiaries of church related disability programmes, a few of them are in the church itself. Even the few that are there are often victims of stigma. This ambivalence of -acceptance and rejection^{||} shows that the church faces significant challenges in accepting and integrating persons with disability into its pastorate. Inversely, this has a subtle and significant influence on general societal attitudes towards persons with disability.

The paper is anchored on three major research questions: how has the church in Malawi historically responded to issues of disability; what gaps are there in the church's attempts to respond to disability; and how can the church fully integrate persons with disability within its fold? These questions are answered within the larger context of the general societal attitudes to disability in Africa and Malawi in particular. The paper argues that in order to deal with its ambivalence towards disability, the church needs to adopt Jesus' model of *pastoral inclusion*^{''} in relation to persons with disability.

The paper takes a qualitative approach and is theoretically expository and critical. Data collection was mostly done through both a desk study and interviews in Blantyre. The sampling technique was purposive and 8 participants categorized as pastors, people with disability and those with relatives with disability were interviewed. The relatively low number of participants was meant to allow for in depth analysis of the issues at hand. Conversation analysis was used in analyzing the data. It should also be noted that while generally making reference to the whole church in Malawi, the paper has a

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significant bias towards the responses of mainline churches to disability.²¹⁸ This is because these churches are pioneers in disability programmes in Malawi. At the same time, the paper is also aware that not all mainline churches respond to disability in the same way. Certain variations in the churches response to disability subsist in Malawi. In this case, the results of the study may not apply to all mainline churches. Nevertheless, the study adds to empirical knowledge on the church and disability in Africa with particular reference to Malawi. In addition, by analysing the gap between the church's historical practice and attitude towards disability, the study informs the church's direction in its quest for an inclusive pastorate.

In terms of structure, the paper has four parts. The first part discusses disability in Malawi and the challenges faced by people with disability. The second part discusses the church's ambivalent response to disability. The third part presents a theological/biblical response to the challenges faced by persons with disability and proposes a model on how the church can integrate people with disability in its pastorate. The last part presents the conclusion.

2. Disability in Malawi

The meaning of disability remains a contentious issue due to its variations and extent in relation to particular contexts. However, traditionally, disability has been defined as a state of impairment which limits an individual's capacity to actively engage in practical everyday life activities.²¹⁹ Traditionally there are four common forms of disability, namely, hearing, seeing, walking and speaking impairment.²²⁰ However, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments are also barriers that may hinder an individual's full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.²²¹ It needs to be acknowledged that implicit in the above definition of disability is the understanding that disability is largely medical in nature. Raghava Reddy has argued the assignment of medical meanings to disability has had many and varied consequences for people with disability.²²² He argues that apart from separating people based on biomedical conditions through the use of diagnostic categories such 'medicalisation' of disability casts human variation as a deviance from the norm, a pathological condition, a deficit, and significantly an individual burden and personal tragedy.²²³ From a social point of view, this affects how those with disability perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. In addition, the link between abled-bodiedness and the "perfect body image" on the one hand, and disability and abnormality on the other, creates superfluous barriers between the able-bodied and persons with disability. It is these skewed relationships that mar the social acceptance of people with disability.

In Malawi it is estimated that 4% of the population is affected by disability in one way or the other.²²⁴ This is against a globally prevalence of 15%.²²⁵ A comparison of these two statistical

²¹⁸ The term –mainline church|| refers to mission-churches who were a product of the classical or first wave of missions in Malawi. These churches represent mainstream Christianity in Malawi.

²¹⁹ Jack Makoko, Nora Ingdal, Annika Nilsson, Basil Kandyomunda, Zozan Kaya, And Mari Brekke Mogen Mainstreaming Disability In The New Development Paradigm, Evaluation Of Norwegian Support To Promote The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities, Malawi Country Report, February 2012, p.3

²²⁰ Makoko, etal, Mainstreaming Disability in the New Development Paradigm, p.3.

²²¹ Makoko, etal, Mainstreaming Disability in the New Development Paradigm, p.3.

²²² Raghava Reddy, –From Impairment to Disability and Beyond: Critical Explorations in Disability Studies,|| Sociological Bulletin Vol. 60, No. 2, p.288.

²²³ Reddy, –From Impairment to Disability and Beyond||, p.288.

²²⁴ National Statistics Office, Malawi Census Report, National Statistics Office, 2008. P.

²²⁵ Makoko, et al, Mainstreaming Disability in the New Development Paradigm,p.3.

²²⁵ Reddy, –From Impairment to Disability and Beyond||. p.xl.

results indicates that Malawi's disability prevalence is under-reported. A country rated 122 (out of 135 countries) on the Human Development Index²²⁶ with poor health facilities and appalling living conditions would normally have a higher rate of disability. The above results probably indicate that stigma associated with reporting disability in Malawi is still prevalent and therefore affects disability statistics at a national level.

There are a number of challenges that people with disability experience in Malawi. Fundamental to these challenges is marginalization and social exclusion from mainstream society.²²⁷ Marginalisation denies people with disability the enjoyment of socio-economic and political benefits accorded to the average citizen. Among the aspects of this marginalization and social exclusion is lack of educational opportunities. For example, while it is possible for the visually impaired boy or girl to enroll in a local school, lack of braille resources including teaching personnel prevents them from meaningfully benefiting from the education system. For those with mobility, intellectual and other disabilities, lack of special-needs teachers in schools makes the situation rather adverse. Sometimes, even where people with disabilities acquire employment skills, it is difficult for them to find a job. This reduces them to using their basic skills as traditional musicians, weavers or in some cases tailors. As a direct consequence of this, households with disabled family members have a lower living standard than the average standards.²²⁸ This is especially true where the disabled is the bread winner. At a social level, there is a significant level of stigma associated with disability. For example, a study showed that most people with disability are less likely to be married than non-disabled people, and that 15.5% of the disabled people are divorced compared to 5% of non-disabled.²²⁹ From a health perspective, Malawi lacks the necessary resources such as medical and material support to effectively help people with disability.²³⁰ This makes the health condition of people with disability precarious. However, while the recognition of the rights of persons with disability has significantly been noticeable in recent political and social discourses, a significant ambivalence has also been evident. For example, the frequent changes in the coordination unit of disability at a national level, from a mere department to a whole ministry and back, shows significant fault lines in the country's commitment to disability.²³¹

3. Church and Disability: The Ambivalence of Acceptance and Rejection

Malawi has a Christian population of about 82.7%.²³² This means that for many people in Malawi, the Bible is a major source of public meaning capable of influencing individual and social attitudes and behaviours. This also suggests that Malawian society, and specifically the churches, should ordinarily be safe havens for people with disability. However, the situation on the ground shows that while the church has generally *'accepted'* and worked towards addressing the rights of people with disability, unconsciously, and through theological and practical lapses, it has tended to ignore and therefore seemed to *'reject'* people with disability in its diaconal strategy. From an acceptance

²²⁶ The United Nations Development Program, Human Development Index Malawi Report, 2010.

²²⁷ Makoko, et al, Mainstreaming Disability in the New Development Paradigm, p.9.

²²⁸ Memory Tembo, *Problems Facing Disabled People in Malawi: A Critical Reflection on My Encounter with a Disabled Woman in a Rural Area in Malawi*, Journal of Comparative Social Work, 2014/1, p.1.

²²⁹ Tembo, *Problems Facing Disabled People in Malawi*, p.2.

²³⁰ Tembo, *Problems Facing Disabled People in Malawi*, p.1

²³¹ It can also be argued that the mere attempts at elevating disability to ministerial level shows government's commitment to issues of disability. Lack of resources at a national level could also explain this oscillation.

²³² National Statistics Office, Malawi 2008 Census Report, National Statistics Office, 2008.

perspective, the church in Malawi has historically played a leading role in caring and addressing the needs of persons with disabilities. As pioneers of education in the country, Special Needs Education (SNE) in Malawi was both pioneered and developed by the church.²³³ In these schools, the church helped young people with disability to experience the love of Christ and attain basic skills for effectively living in society. Most of the graduates from these schools became teachers and resource persons in either special needs or regular schools and other government departments. They were therefore able to earn a living and become role models in society. In the South Africa General Mission (now Africa Evangelical Church) some of the graduates became pastors and evangelists.²³⁴ In effect the church was making people who were not considered as useful in society to become useful and vanguards of change.

Currently there are a number of special needs tertiary educational institutions pioneered by the church. Among the notable ones is the Montfort Teacher Training College in Chiradzulu. Recently, the Catholic University of Malawi has introduced a Bachelors Degree in Special Needs, the first of its kind in the country.²³⁵ This shows how forward looking the church has been in addressing the rights and welfare of people with disability in the country. To complement the church's work, the government has continued to support these institutions, in addition to establishing more special needs institutions. Recently, the church, especially the Catholic Church in partnership with Norwegian Church Aid has embarked on a disability rights projects which mobilizes persons with disability to understand their rights and also help communities to respect the rights of people with disability.²³⁶ In addition, other churches have also been very progressive to integrate people with disability. For example, in the Jehovah's Witnesses Church, Sign Language Studio Bible publications are translated and videotaped for those who use Malawi Sign Language.²³⁷ This shows significant attempts by the church to accept people with disability and therefore make the church inclusive.²³⁸

However, while historically accepting people with disability as indicated above, there are a number of attitudes and practices in the church that tend to project a –rejection attitude to people with disability. This rejection comes in different forms. First, the way the Bible is used in relation to disability presents a challenge to the integration of persons with disability in the church.²³⁹ It is

²³³ Classical mission such as Dutch Reformed Church (DRCM), South Africa General Mission (SAGM) and the Catholic Church pioneered the work. The DRCM (now Nkhoma Synod of the CCAP) established a school for learners with visual impairment at Chilanga in 1950. The same year the Lulwe School for the blind was started in Nsanje by the SAGM (now Africa Evangelical Church). The SAGM later established other schools for the blind at Chimbombo and Tengani and in 1968 the school for the deaf was established in Chiradzulu by the Catholics. See, Malawi Government, National Policy on Special needs education, Malawi Government, May 2007. SAGM, Archival document, 1967.

²³⁴ SAGM, Archival Document, 1967. Today, in spite of the challenges of stigma and other practical challenges, the Africa Evangelical Church has two pastors with visual impairment.

²³⁵ See, A.J.L. Makoko and Patrick Chimutu, The Catholic University of Malawi Baseline Study Report on the Status of Special Needs Education in Malawi, 2007.

²³⁶ Phone Interview with Steven Ndlovu, Education Projects Officer/Coordinator, Episcopal Council of Malawi, 11/6/2014.

²³⁷ Jehovah's Witness in Malawi, [Malawi Tour Brochure - Jehovah's Witnesses](http://Malawi_Tour_Brochure_-_Jehovah's_Witnesses_download.jw.org/files/media_cmsassets/7b/fo_s-Mw_E.pdf), download.jw.org/files/media_cmsassets/7b/fo_s-Mw_E.pdf, viewed 11/06/2015. It is estimated that this project would reach the more than 70,000 people with hearing impairment with the Good News of God's Kingdom.

²³⁸ However, it is important to note that most of the interventions undertaken by the church, except for the Jehovah's example, are outreach related or –week day ministry projects mostly undertaken from an expert rather than a pastoral/diaconal approach. While these attempts have been instrumental in uplifting the people with disability and given them a place in society, they have not significantly helped the church to integrate people with disability into its mainstream diaconal/pastoral ministry. This represents a significant gap in the church's ministry to the people with disability.

²³⁹ Respondent 1: Interview, 20/5/15.

common knowledge that the Bible is intermingled with texts that when literally interpreted can either be liberative or can reinforce the marginalization and exclusion of people with disability. Unfortunately, unlike their liberating counterparts, the marginalizing and excluding biblical texts often find significant expression in the church's discourse. These texts help in creating 'an alienating symbolic language' in the church's worship and in the process generate an unpleasant and unwelcoming atmosphere for people with disability. The frequent allusions to disabilities such as blindness, deafness or immobility as symbols of sin prevalent in most church sermons, songs and drama are a result of the marginalizing and excluding power of some biblical texts. Most people with disability therefore choose to stay away from the church to avoid this possibility of personal embarrassment. Others, because they were born from Christian parents, or out of sheer Christian conviction, continue to endure the psychological torture every Sunday.²⁴⁰

In addition to the alienating symbolic language, the Bible has also been used to justify the exclusion of people with disability from visible roles in the church.²⁴¹ In most mainline churches, people with disability are denied full participation in church life either as Elders, Deacons and Deaconesses.²⁴² At an advanced level, most mainline churches struggle in accepting people with disability into pastoral ministry. While a literal biblical understanding and practical issues largely influence this attitude towards persons with disability, this perception is perhaps influenced by the perfect body image emanating from the medicalisation of disability. This idea of a perfect body image generates in the general church membership a 'concealed rejection' of people with disability into visible roles in the life of the church. Such veiled rejection is also fuelled by the traditional religious/cultural perspective of disability as a curse from God arising out of a violation of some commandment or ancestral violation or other evil social and individual practices.²⁴³ The association of disability with evil is so rampant in African society such that even the best traditional doctor with the most potent or dangerous traditional medicine always has a visible and queer disability.²⁴⁴ All this contributes to the skewed relationship between the able-bodied and people with disabilities and explains the 'stained glass or ceiling effect' which bars the people with disability from being given significant roles in the church. This has been a significant source of frustration to some people with disability who feel they are denied the opportunity to effectively serve in the church.²⁴⁵

Second, from a practical level, there are also a number of challenges that people with disability face in the church. Some have argued that the church's approach to public worship often leaves people with disability with a sense of inadequacy, and as passive participants in worship services.²⁴⁶ In a number of denominations, worship styles and practices, and therefore the whole experience of 'church' is highly individualised. This leads to too much emphasis not on 'church' but instead on the 'individual and their relationship with Jesus Christ.' The practice of demanding (and seriously so)

²⁴⁰ I remember being in a church where a very dedicated unsighted Primary School teacher sat in the front row in the church and the choir came up to sing. Insensitive to this man they began to sing about being blind and its challenges and unblushingly related it to spiritual blindness. In spite of their sincerity as a choir, I would imagine what was going on in the mind of the unsighted who kept smiling as the song was sung.

²⁴¹ Respondent 2: Personal Interview, 30/05/15.

²⁴² Respondent 3: Personal Interview, 2/06/2015

²⁴³ M. Eskay, V. C., Onu, J. N., Igbo, N., Obiyo, L., Ugwuanyi, 'Disability Within the African Culture,' *US-China Education Review B* 4 (2012) 473, p.478.

²⁴⁴ Eskay, et al, 'Disability Within the African Culture, p.478.

²⁴⁵ Respondent 3: Personal Interview, 2/06/2015.

²⁴⁶ This is a general perception especially with the development in mainstream churches of contemporary services.

that every one stands up to sing, pray or come forward to give offering or receive their miracle make church highly individualized. For the physically and visually impaired or those with hearing impairment, it becomes very challenging to negotiate these –godly demands‖ in the context of worship. As a result, it becomes easy for the person with disability to feel like an intruder in an otherwise –able-bodied worship service.‖ In addition, the –commodification‖ of healing where people with disability become the most available and ready consumers presents significant challenges. At the basic level, it creates a significant level of ambiguity to their availability in worship services, as everyone perceives them as expecting healing.²⁴⁷ At the worst level, it creates a crisis of faith, especially when failed miracles in healing services are attributed to their lack of faith.²⁴⁸

Third, the church’s lack of intentional diaconal strategy towards people with disability creates problems for the integration of people with disability. Most people with disability and those who have relatives with disability acknowledge that most churches in Malawi have no intentional ministry to address their spiritual needs. It is generally felt that beyond humanitarian aid in the form of blankets, food or school fees, the people with disability and or their relatives lack spiritual encouragement to manage their disability in the face of social stigma in a disability unfriendly world. This shows a significant gap in the church’s pastoral/spiritual ministry towards its members with disability or those who have relatives with disability.

Fourth, the church in Malawi remains largely physically inaccessible to people with disability which presents another practical barrier to their integration. The design of church buildings including the layout of church interiors, especially the pulpit, makes church environments highly inaccessible to people with disability. Sometimes the church environment has no toilets, or if they are available, they are too far away or small to negotiate in a wheel chair. This unwelcome atmosphere, coupled with a general unfriendly attitude from the membership of the church, lack of braille or sign language services in most churches, makes the church an uncongenial place for people with disability.

The above challenges have led the church in Malawi to be largely devoid of people with disability. However, by glossing over the integration of people with disability, the church has shown that it is not inclusive enough to allow for every human experience into its fold. This failure to recognize and enjoy the full spectrum of God’s creation in all its human forms makes the church disabled. At most, it betrays the gospel demand for a place for the –least of these‖ (Matt 20:40) in the kingdom. N. Njoroge has argued that the problem with the church is not that it has people who are deaf, mute and blind (and with other disabilities, my paraphrase) within it, rather the church is itself usually deaf, mute and blind towards concerns and needs of people with disability.²⁴⁹ Njoroge’s argument becomes true in view of the available gaps in the church’s ministry towards persons with disability. As the church fails to fully reach out to and fully utilize people with disability, it fails to fully realise its highest potential. In effect it becomes itself disabled.

4. Towards a Biblical/Theological Model for a Disability Inclusive Church

²⁴⁷ Respondent 5: Personal Interview, 15/05/2015.

²⁴⁸ Respondent 5: Personal Interview, 15/05/2015

²⁴⁹ Quoted in Pauline A. Otieno, "Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Disability: Implications on the Rights of Persons with Disability in Kenya" *Disability Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No 4 (2009) p.17.

In view of the significant gaps in the church's response to disability, the need to integrate people with disability within its diaconal strategy becomes imperative. This urgency arises both from the nature of the church as a caring community, and its role as the salt and light of the world (Mt 5:13-16). It is imperative that as salt and light of the world, the practice of the church in relation to people with disability resonates with its teaching on human dignity and worth. In addition, addressing the inherent gaps in its diaconal strategy would also help the church take a moral higher ground when championing the cause of people with disability in Malawi and beyond.

The paper argues that Jesus' approach of pastoral inclusion' provides a model on how the church in Malawi can fully integrate people with disability into its pastorate and not just regard them as external beneficiaries' of its development programmes. The relevance of pastoral inclusion as a paradigm for the church's approach is that it is biblical and modeled on Jesus' approach to people with disability. In addition, it also resonates with the church's current project to disability issues. The idea of pastoral inclusion is premised on the presupposition that all people with disability are human beings created in God's image. Therefore, they have equal worth everywhere, including inside the four walls of the church. When humanity fell out of grace and human nature was affected by sin, all human beings including those with disability technically became sinners in need of salvation. The salvation that Jesus effected through the divine transaction on the cross was for all who are lost (Lk 19:10). Since 'all' are sinners (Rom 3:23), including those with disability, it becomes mandatory that the church takes a holistic (social-spiritual) approach to disability issues.

The idea of pastoral inclusion is pervasive in Jesus' ministry. As part of ministry to the world, Jesus did not create special intervention programmes for the sick and those with disability. He himself became the programme for the poor, sick and those with disability and cared for them every day of the week including the Sabbath. In fact, he either preached as he healed or healed as he preached. This simultaneous inclusion of healing and preaching became Jesus approach to ministry. The model of pastoral inclusion also highlights the revolutionary way Jesus cared for those with disability. It is this revolutionary process which provides a model for the church's approach to issues of disability. A careful reading of the gospel tradition reveals that during his ministry, unlike any of his contemporary rabbis, Jesus both touched and spoke to or with people with disability. This was true for even the most untouchable in society, the leper, (Luke 5:12-13). The idea of touch signifies proximity, and suggests how, in the context of his ministry, Jesus brought those with disability close to himself. In addition to touching them, Jesus also talked and listened to those with disability. The synoptic tradition is rife with instances where Jesus calls those with disability -friend or -son (Luke 5:20; Mt 9:2). This ability to speak to or with people with disability created a personal touch that allowed him to hear them even when the crowd rebuked them to be silent (Mk 10:46-52.). In this way Jesus gave people with disability the dignity that society around them did not. However, Jesus' ministry to people with disability did not stop at giving them sight, mobility or hearing. It either proceed to or was preceded by his desire to forgive their sins and bestow upon them eternal life (Luke 5:20; Mt 9:2). This represented real -pastoral inclusion, an inclusion which allowed those with disability to have easy access to him at all time and enjoy the full benefits of his salvific plan.

Jesus' model of diaconal or pastoral inclusion has significant implications on how the church can deal with issues of disability. Just as Jesus was able to bring people with disability within the boundaries of his ministry where he touched and talked to and with them, the church needs to bring people with disability within its confines. The current pastoral distance between the church and

people with disability is contrary to Jesus' approach. This distance makes it difficult for the church to effectively speak with and for those with disability in church and society when their rights are violated. J. O'Brien's has asserted that to speak for the poor (or the disable, my addition) is first of all to speak with them and to speak with them is to create -conditions under which they can speak for themselves.²⁵⁰ By bringing in and creating the right environment for people with disability, the church can effectively champion the cause of the people with disability in Malawi. It addition, the attempt can help the church move from a mere project perspective to disability, which only breeds _healthy sinners', to a holistic approach that will not only serve people with disability but also save them.

There are a number of ways through which the church can integrate people with disability within its diaconal/pastoral life. First, the church needs to develop –a liberating hermeneutic in its preaching and theological discourse. This can help the church to significantly manage the alienating symbolic language in its public worship and theological discourse. In order to effectively do this the church needs to realize that the bible's ascription of physical disability to certain religious behaviours and actions is largely part of biblical iconic polemics.²⁵¹ An understanding of the literary and historical context of a particular biblical text and its polemical intentions is key to developing a liberating biblical hermeneutics in the church. Second, the church needs to rethink or restructure its public worship so that it accommodates the diversity of the congregation. The church needs to enrich its experience of –church by managing unnecessary individual demands in public worship that estrange those with disability. This is a difficult task but time and commitment would yield fruitful results especially for the next generation church.

Third, the church needs to liberate the concept of healing from its current commodification in worship contexts. Without undermining the place of miraculous healing, the church needs to realise that while the words healing and cure are used interchangeably in the New Testament, healing is not necessarily about removal of impairment but includes a holistic approach to health. It includes the physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of identity even in the context of a permanent impairment. This healing can be attained by maintaining and improving the quality of life for people with disability through the experience of a loving community and social acceptance as opposed to eradicating impairment.²⁵²

Forth, the church needs to develop an intentional diaconal ministry to people with disability. Through this ministry people with disability will be able to experience the love of Christ and develop a positive identity to their impairment. For example, studies of parents of children with disabilities in other countries have shown that religion is a strong source of support. In these studies, prayer, church attendance, and several specific religious beliefs were identified as sources of support. The notions of hope and personal strength were identified as effects that religious beliefs and practices can have on

²⁵⁰ J. O'Brien, quoted in Scot Danforth, –Liberation theology of disability and the option for the poor, in Disability Studies Quarterly, Volume 25, (No.3 Summer 2005).p 17.

²⁵¹ For further reading on this see, Saul M. Olyan, The Ascription Of Physical Disability As A Stigmatizing Strategy In Biblical Iconic Polemics, Journal of Hebrew Scriptures, Volume 9, Article, 14, 2009, p.1

²⁵² See, Allen, Rachel, Faith and Disability: Comfort, Confusion or Conflict? How does the adoption of the Christian faith influence the lives of people who identify as „disabled“ in Britain in the 21st Century? Dissertation Presented to the School Of Sociology And Social Policy, University of Leeds in partial fulfillment of the Masters in Disability Studies, 2010.

a parent's ability to cope.²⁵³ The church in Malawi can do this by helping people with disability to understand what it means to be human, to be a person and to be whole even in the context of disability. In addition, an intentional and sustained diaconal ministry to people with disability is possible if theological colleges integrate issues of disability in their curriculum. Lastly, the church in Malawi should strive to make its physical environment –disability friendly.²⁵⁴ While this represents a major paradigm shift given the entrenched mindset on how church environments are structured, it is a worthy effort, especially if it is done for –the least of brothers.¶

5. Conclusion

The church's continued truthfulness to its nature as a caring community is not complete until it embraces the whole complexity of human experiences in its ministry. Since people with disability make an important part of that human experience, their integration within the church's diaconal strategy becomes obligatory. The paper has shown that while the church has historically championed the cause of people with disability, significant shortfalls have also been evident, especially in its challenges to integrate people with disability into its diaconal/worship life. This represents an ambivalence of acceptance and rejection. Given the significant influence of the church in attitude formation, this shortfall has significant implications on how people with disability are viewed within the larger society. The paper has therefore suggested that Jesus' approach of pastoral inclusion provides a practical model on how the church can integrate people with disability within its diaconal life.

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²⁵⁴ Interestingly, the Catholic Secretariat has plans to make their premises friendly to people with disabilities. (Phone Interview with Steven Ndlovu, Education Coordinator, Episcopal Council of Malawi, 11/6/2014.)

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